A case for using online discussion forums in critical psychological research

Jowett, A.

Original citation & hyperlink:
Jowett, A. (2015) A case for using online discussion forums in critical psychological research. Qualitative Research in Psychology, volume 12 (3): 287-297.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2015.1008906

Publisher statement: This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Qualitative Research in Psychology on 3rd February 2015, available online: www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14780887.2015.1008906.

TITLE: A Case for Using Online Discussion Forums in Critical Psychological Research

Authors and affiliations: Adam Jowett, Department of Psychology & Behavioural Sciences, Coventry University

Abstract: Online forums provide a wealth of publicly accessible data and have proven particularly useful for critical psychologists wishing to examine naturalistic data on a wide range of social phenomena. This paper begins by considering the use of online discussion forums for critical discursive psychological research and outlines ethical debates regarding their use (particularly in light of past and current British Psychological Society guidelines). To demonstrate how such data can be used in critical psychology I provide an illustrative example of a discursive analysis of a single online discussion thread taken from a diabetes newsgroup that examines anti-social online behaviours in the form of 'trolling', 'flaming' and heterosexism.

Keywords: Online discussion forums; Internet research; Internet ethics; Discourse analysis; Heterosexism; Trolling; Flaming

Introduction

In recent decades there has been a rapid increase in the use of the Internet to collect qualitative data for research. The Internet has provided new ways for us to conduct interviews and focus groups (Stewart and Williams, 2005; Jowett, Peel and Shaw, 2011) as well as offering a wealth of unsolicited data in the form of websites, blogs and online discussion forums. In particular there is a growing body of discourse analytic and, more broadly, critical research that examines online interaction in the form of online discussion forums (e.g. Lamerichs and te Molder, 2003; Sneijder and te Molder, 2004; Horne and Wiggins, 2009; Veen et al., 2010; Bennet and Gough, 2012; Callaghan and Lazard, 2012; Goodman and Rowe, 2014). Although it is important to note that discourse analysis is not automatically a critical endeavour (Gough, McFadden and McDonald, 2013), discursive approaches are commonly employed by critical psychologists. Online discussion forums have provided a proliferation of discourse on a wide range of topics as people argue, debate and construct their identities online. Importantly for critical psychologists, the Internet also functions as a site for the cultural contestation of meaning, providing a virtual space for social phenomena to be constructed through language and for discourses to be (re)produced and resisted (Stainton Rogers, 2009) through discussion and debate.

In this paper I provide an overview some of the advantages and disadvantages of using online forums for discursive (and more broadly, critical) psychological research and discuss ethical issues in light of recent British Psychological Society guidelines. I then illustrate how online forums can be used in discursive and critical research by presenting an analysis that attends to online-specific behaviours in the form of

'trolling' and 'flaming' and illustrates how power relations are manifested in online discussions.

Advantages and (potential) disadvantages of using online forums as data

A key advantage to using Internet forums for research are that they provide an abundant source of naturalistic material, taking place without the presence of a researcher influencing the kind of discourse and interaction produced (Robinson, 2001; Coulson, 2012; Holtz, Kronberger and Wagner, 2012). This is particularly useful for critical psychologists as it provides a wealth of discourse where issues of power, identity and prejudice can be examined, allowing researchers to explore topics for which data might otherwise be difficult to obtain. It is also particularly useful for discursive psychologists who typically prefer naturally occurring data (Potter and Hepburn, 2005) with the Internet providing a novel source of recorded naturally occurring interaction on a scale that was previously unimaginable (Lamerichs and te Molder, 2003).

A number of disadvantages of using online discussion forums have also been noted in the existing literature (for a more comprehensive overview see Holtz et al., 2012). However, many of the limitations commonly identified are typically based on positivist assumptions that critical psychologists may wish to take issue with. For instance, it has been suggested that the inability to request clarification or elaboration from those posting to forums may give rise to ambiguity and misunderstanding, further exacerbated by missing words, spelling errors and strange punctuation which characterise this kind of informal communication (Seale et al., 2009). Although such ambiguity does indeed exist online, those working within more relativist paradigms of research may argue that the meanings of texts are never simply transparent.

Furthermore, this ambiguity is present not only for the researcher but also for other members of the forum engaging in the discussion. How speakers respond to such ambiguity and make sense of what has previously been said, can itself be a focus of discursive psychological research rather than a limitation of the data, as illustrated in the example analysis presented later on.

Another commonly cited limitation is that the anonymity of online forums 'complicates analysis insofar as there is normally only little sociodemographic information available about the users' (Holtz et al., 2012: 56). While some information (such as gender) may be inferred from the content of posts (e.g. from the name used), there is often no way of verifying this information. This problem may however, be less relevant for critical psychologists using discursive approaches as the 'real' identity of the speaker is arguably of less interest to the researcher than their membership of the group in which they are speaking and the way in which they construct an identity within the interaction itself. For discourse analytic approaches, it is the interaction or textual representation of the research topic (which may include the construction of self and others) that is of interest rather than the 'real' identities of the people assumed to lie behind the text. For Foucauldian influenced discourse analysts the emphasis is on the subject positions made possible within the texts under study 'and not authors who speak through the text as if it were a kind of transparent screen upon which the writer's intentions were displayed' (Parker, 1994: 100). Meanwhile many discursive psychologists borrow from conversation analysis the principle that identity categories (e.g. gender) should only be considered as relevant to the analysis when these categories are made relevant within the interaction by speakers themselves (Kitzinger, 2000).

Ethical considerations

The use of online forums in qualitative research also raises a number of unique ethical considerations upon which there is no clear consensus (Whitehead, 2007). At the heart of debates surrounding the use of online forums for qualitative research is the question of what counts as 'public' or 'private' online? There are some who take the view that messages posted to publically accessible forums are in the public domain and therefore institutional ethical review and gaining consent from the contributors to online forums are unnecessary (Walther, 2002; Seale et al, 2010). Others however disagree and claim that using pre-existing online interactions from discussion forums without the informed consent of authors may be considered a violation of privacy (King, 1996; Eysenbach and Till, 2001) and that even texts that are publically accessible may be perceived as private by users of the forum (Elgesem, 2002). There are also issues relating to the anonymity (or traceability) of the data as data extracts included in written reports may in some cases be traceable through the use of search engines. Indeed there would appear to be a paradox in the ethical principles of only using the most 'public' forums while also maintaining anonymity, as the more 'public' the data is, the more traceable it is likely to be. However not all agree that data should be anonymised. Herring (1996), for example, has advocated the identification of data sources in some cases for the purposes of transparency in order to allow the reader to assess the analytic claims made against the full data set. A more common approach when 'harvesting' from open forums has been not to name the forum used and to give the posters pseudonyms when writing up the research (Rodham and Gavin, 2006), despite the possibility of readers still being able to trace the source of the data in some cases.

The British Psychological Society's (BPS, 2009: 9.1) general ethical guidelines state that 'observational research is only acceptable in situations where those observed would expect to be observed by strangers'. Although it is unclear how this principle should be applied in the context of our online activities, it is arguably the case that the multi-party and anonymous nature of Internet forums means that contributors can expect their posts to be read by strangers. In fact, as shall be illustrated in the example analysis, when reading Internet posts, it becomes clear that contributors orient towards addressing a group of strangers. Even when replying to a specific post, this is done within a context whereby it is normatively acceptable for others to read and respond to it.

Debates about ethical issues of privacy and anonymity when using the Internet for research are by no means new. These very issues were being debated within disciplines such as sociolinguistics, information science and indeed psychology in the 1990s (e.g. Herring, 1996; King, 1996). However, it was not until 2007 that the BPS first published guidelines for ethical practice in psychological research online. Of particular relevance for psychologists using online forums as data in qualitative research was the initial suggestion that that "[r]esearchers should be aware that participants may consider their publicly accessible Internet activity to be private" and "[i]n cases where direct quotations are necessary to the research methodology (for instance, in conversation or discourse analysis), then the consent of those sampled should be sought" (BPS, 2007: 3-4). The application of these initial guidelines by institutional ethics committees could arguably have had a chilling effect on critical research within the discipline. How could such guidelines be followed by researchers

seeking to conduct critical research on issues of power, conflict and prejudice in public computer-mediated interaction? Those who post hostile and discriminatory statements in public forums are unlikely to consent to their use in research. In fact the guidance was doubly troubling as it seemed to suggest that researchers should acquire consent for the use of publicly accessible material, whilst at the same time warning researchers against sending unsolicited emails to gain that consent, thus precluding almost all discourse analytic research of online forums.

In 2013, the BPS updated their guidance which adopted quite a different stance. The new guidelines acknowledge that opinions differ regarding the 'public' status of readily accessible material and advise that the potential for harm should be considered before using such material without consent, however, they state that "[i]t is important to note that analysis of online discussions or other activities is not precluded" and "[w]here it is reasonable to argue that there is likely no perception and/or expectation of privacy (or where scientific/social value and/or research validity considerations are deemed to justify undisclosed observation), use of research data without gaining valid consent may be justifiable" (BPS, 2013: 7).

I agree broadly with Stainton Roger's (2009: 347) warning to critical psychologists of the need to be cautious and to 'resist being so beguiled by the ease of snooping that we undermine the very social justice agenda that we are so proud to claim'. Concerns about our privacy online have become all the more pertinent since the recent revelations of intelligence agencies harvesting private online communications such as emails and text messages. Nevertheless, some forms of online communication are clearly more private than others. Online forums that require approval from a

moderator/list administrator to join, invitation only groups or forums that require membership to view are clearly intended to be private and should be treated as such. However, to treat the vast majority of publicly accessible online material as 'private' because the authors may object to its use in research is arguably an extreme position. Indeed I would agree with Susan Herring (1996), who provided a rare critical intervention early on in these debates, that restrictive ethical guidelines that inhibit critical research on important social topics might themselves be considered ethically dubious.

An example study: 'What the hell does being Gay have to do with diabetics'?

The example discussed in this section is presented to illustrate some of the issues highlighted above such as how discursive psychologists may examine behaviour particular to online communication ('flaming' and 'trolling') and respond to issues of ambiguity relating to the intentions of online comments. It is also used to illustrate how critical psychologists may use online forums to examine the construction of identity and how power relations (e.g. heterosexism) are manifest in online contexts. The data are taken from a study that aimed to examine how non-heterosexuality is discussed within online discussion forums for people with chronic health conditions (Jowett, 2011). To search for relevant data the terms 'gay', 'lesbian', 'bisexual' and 'sexual identity' were entered into widely used Internet search engines in combination with terms for chronic health conditions. The selection criteria for the material were that the discussions involved interactions about (non-hetero)sexual identity and a chronic health condition and that they occurred in an openly accessible discussion forum. A single case (i.e. a single thread) was chosen for analysis. A single case approach is well suited to a detailed discursive analysis as well as to exploratory

qualitative research (Antaki et al., 2006). The thread was taken from a discussion forum for people with diabetes and consisted of 306 posts, by 41 different contributors, however owing to constraints of space the analysis presented here will focus only on the first three posts of the thread. Although socio-demographic information about the contributors was not available it would appear from the content of posts that the discussion included individuals both from the US and the UK, both men and women and people with Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes.

For ethical reasons I selected a thread that was publicly accessible (i.e. it did not require a username or password to view the discussion), and had been inactive for period of time. While I did not seek to gain consent from those contributing to the forum, approval from an institutional ethics committee was sought. In line with Rodham and Gavin's (2006) recommendations and other published qualitative research using online data, contributors were given pseudonyms (even if they already used an anonymous username) and the particular forum under discussion will not be identified. The data were analysed using a broadly discursive psychological approach to analysing online interaction (Lamerichs and te Molder, 2003) while also drawing on insights from online conversation analysis (Antaki et al., 2005).

Analysis

The thread selected for analysis begins with someone enquiring if there are any other 'gay diabetics' using the forum and sets the scene for the rest of the online discussion:

Post 1 – The opening post

1. Are there any other gay diabetics out there? There doesn't seem to be
2. any info out there concerning issues specific to us. I'd be
3. interested in talking with others.
4. Thanks.
5. Rbz
6. For the flamers: I've been reading this newsgroup on and off
7. since 1992, I work in a computer business, I've edited Netiquette
8. FAQS, I have a shelf of Miss Manners books, and we're simply not
9. going to agree on the appropriateness of this post. I think it is
10. appropriate for this newsgroup, and I ask you to extend the courtesy
11. to the other members of not posting a series of flames.

The opening question (in line 1) of this post alone achieves a number of interactional activities. In asking if there are 'any *other* gay diabetics out there?' (line 1) the author identifies him/herself as a 'gay diabetic' and addresses the question to the thread's unknown readership ('out there'). The desired next speaker is also implicitly nominated (i.e. 'other gay diabetics'). The writer of this post then addresses other gay diabetics by stating that there appears to be no information available which is specific to 'us' and states that they would like to talk to other people who identify as such. The author then offers a postscript addressed to 'the flamers' (Internet slang for someone who posts hostile messages). In lines six to eight, Rbz provides a four part list of credentials functioning to position him/herself as qualified to determine the 'appropriateness' of the post, about which it is stated that the author and the flamers are 'simply not going to agree' (lines 8-9). This 'end of story' type formulation appears to be designed to foreclose any debate by suggesting that any such discussion about the appropriateness of the post would be futile (Speers and Potter, 2000). Thus,

within this postscript, Rbz displays an orientation that others may potentially deem the post inappropriate and orients to the writing of such a post as an accountable activity. There is also a pre-emptive categorisation of any response questioning the appropriateness of the post as a 'flame'. Nevertheless, it is precisely this kind of anticipated response which is subsequently received:

Post 2 – The first response

1. What in the hell does being Gay have to do with diabetics, Does your
2. sexual preference in someway increase/decrease the effects of diabetes??
3. What next??
4. Are there any other diabetic pedophiles out there??
5. Are there any other diabetic necrophilliacs out there??
6. How about are there any one legged, red haired, blue eyed, diabetic,
7. hermophrodite out there??
8. What possible diabetic problems are specific to Gays that are not a concern
9. to us all no matter our sexual preference??
10. Personally I think this is a troll (Yes I took the bait) by someone wishing
11. to push his/her gay agenda..
12. What a crock of crap.

The author of the first response appears to orient to the thread as being an unsuitable topic for the forum through providing alternative hypothetical versions of the original question (lines 4-7) that are designed to sound indecent or ludicrous and construct the issue of sexual identity as an inappropriate and/or irrelevant concern for the forum. The message ends by attending to the interactional business of accounting for this response. By objecting to the original post, this response potentially lays itself open to

being characterised as one of the 'flamers' anticipated by the previous 'speaker'. The author responds to this positioning by constructing the original post as a 'troll'. Herring et al. (2002: 371) explain that a 'troll' is a post that 'baits and provokes other group members, often with the result of drawing them into fruitless argument and diverting attention away from the stated purposes of the group'. By positioning the original post as a 'troll' the author re-positions their response as being exactly what the original poster wanted ('yes I took the bait', line 10).

The author also addresses not only the original contributor here but also the potential readership of the thread more broadly. Note that at the beginning of this post, the author addresses their response to the previous contributor ('does *your* sexual preference...' line 1). However, in line 10 the post addresses the wider readership of the forum in speaking *about* the original contributor, referred to as 'someone' wishing to push his/her gay agenda (lines 10-11). This shift can perhaps best be understood if we consider that the notion of a 'gay agenda' is a form of conspiratorial discourse (Herman, 1998) and, as Billig (1991) has observed, conspiratorial discourse is rarely directed at the supposed 'conspirators' themselves, as they should presumably already be aware of the conspiracy. The original poster is thus presented as a disingenuous 'troll' engaged in some form of political subterfuge (pushing a 'gay agenda') rather than genuinely seeking support from other users of the forum. The original contributor did not reply to this response, however, other users of the forum constructed the original contributor's intentions rather differently as can be seen from the subsequent response:

Post 3 – The second response

In response to Post 2

1. Well this was a thread from many months ago, but I see the poster's point
2. in that he might want to find support from other gay diabetics. I can
3. empathize because when I was first diagnosed the only other people I
4. found in a diabetic support group were all overweight middle aged people
5. Went to another support group, the people there were ancient! Left me
6. wanting to find others in their teens and early twenties going through the
7. same thing. At that time, I felt like a weirdo, I didn't know anybody my age
8. with diabetes save for my best friend. It can be lonely give the guy a
9. break
10. Beryl, Type I (Humalog and Ultralente)

This second response occurred three months after the previous post. Within a face-to-face conversation, a lack of uptake by other speakers or a topic change would usually indicate the end of a discussion. Although an online discussion operates in a very different time frame, Beryl's opening reference to the period of time between the last post and her own contribution orients to an understanding that adding to the discussion after such a considerable period of inactivity is in some way non-normative (the discussion may be deemed 'over'). The post is not a response to the original message, but is designed to counter to the previous reply (Post 2).

Firstly, I would like to draw attention to the way in which Beryl selects a different relevant item of the original post to Post 2. While the author of Post 2 focuses on the original post's mention of 'specific' concerns (Post 1, line 2; Post 2, line 8), Beryl selects their desire to 'talk' to other gay diabetics (Post 1, line 3) and re-formulates this in terms of seeking 'support' from others (Post 3, line 2). Moreover, she suggests this is something with which she can 'empathize' (line 3) and demonstrates this with a

'second story' (Arminen, 2004). Second stories are a device by which one does not merely claim to empathise with a previous speaker but demonstrates understanding by providing a parallel story which is designed to resemble the first (Arminen, 2004; Veen et al., 2010). Arminen (2004) suggests a number of functions of second stories including providing support for first speakers, offering new perspectives and interpretations as well as helping other group members make sense of what a previous speaker has said. Veen et al. (2010) suggests that within this medium, where the original speaker may fail to elaborate or repair their previous turn (as was the case in this discussion), second stories can be used by other group members to contextualise posts.

The second story presented here involves Beryl's past experiences of attending support groups whose members were 'overweight', 'middle aged' or 'ancient' (line 5), a three-part list designed to encapsulate those different from her in her youth. She suggests that this led to a desire to find others in their adolescence or early twenties 'going through the same thing' (lines 6-7). Beryl thus provides a candidate answer to the previous speaker's question ('what the hell does being Gay have to do with diabetics?' Post 2, line 1) by suggesting that the first contributor, like herself in her youth, may also wish to find others like him/herself 'going through the same thing' for support.

Beryl concludes her post in line eight with the statement: 'It can be lonely give the guy a break'. In doing so, Beryl addresses the post to the previous 'speaker'. The idiomatic formulation 'give the guy a break' positions Post 2 as being undeservedly hostile. Thus Beryl constructs the original post, by way of a second story, as a

reasonable request for support (in contrast to its previous characterisation as a disingenuous troll) and orients to the previous response as being a hostile flame.

Conclusions

The three posts discussed above were just the beginning of a lengthy debate regarding the appropriateness/relevance of sexuality to the diabetes discussion board. The above analysis is presented as an illustrative example of one way in which discussion forums can be used to critically examine online interaction and explore the ways that people construct their posts and orient (or attend) to others' contributions. The above example illustrates how the phenomena of 'flaming' and 'trolling' can be viewed as rhetorical positions in an argumentative context. Rbz pre-emptively positions anyone posting a non-conforming response as a 'flamer' while another contributor responds this to by constructing Rbz as a 'troll'. While previous research has documented instances of online trolling or flaming (as defined by the researcher) (e.g. Herring et al, 2002), I would argue that a discursive psychological approach can provide a more sophisticated understanding of 'anti-social' online behaviour by examining what contributors themselves deem to be a 'troll' or a 'flame' and how posts are rhetorically designed to pre-empt or respond to such positions. It is important to note that while I cannot be sure of the original poster's intentions (i.e. whether they were trying to cause controversy or genuinely seeking support from other users) nor verify their identity as a 'gay diabetic', from a discursive perspective it is the way in which others respond and orient to the original post and each other's responses that are of interest; the way in which they debate the genuineness of the original poster's intentions and contest the relevance of sexuality to living with diabetes was of primary concern in my analysis.

It could also be argued, from a more Foucauldian influenced perspective, that this example demonstrates the ways in which power relations can manifest themselves in such online forums in ways that are exclusionary. For instance, the way in which the original contributor accounts for their message, pre-empts negative responses, and subsequently receives them, illustrate one way in which heterosexism may operate within online forums to police and regulate sexuality as well as what can (and cannot) be discussed within the forum. This is important, as most research on online 'support' forums for people with chronic conditions has arguably focused on the positive aspects of giving and receiving social support online. However, as Pitts (2004) has suggested, if we do not examine online support forums through a critical lens, we may risk romanticising the Internet's potential to 'empower' rather than viewing it as a site where dominant discourses and power relations are (re)produced.

In this article I have put forward a case for using online discussion forums as data in critical (and particularly discursive) psychological approaches and have argued that some of the commonly cited limitations of this data source do not apply equally across different analytic and epistemological approaches. I have also outlined some of the key ethical concerns and debates regarding the use of this kind of data. Although I strongly believe it is important for critical psychologists to be aware of the ethical issues involved in online research and the need to justify our research practices in light of the ethical principles, I have also sought to warn against overly restrictive guidelines that could be used to prevent important critical research on discourse within the public domain. Contributors to online forums whose interactions could be viewed as instances of flaming, trolling, heterosexism (or otherwise discriminatory),

are unlikely to consent for their posts to be used in critical psychological research. To require such consent, even when comments are made in the public domain, would arguably prevent critical research on topics of social significance. The illustrative example offered here serves to highlight how online discussion forums can provide valuable data for critical psychologists wishing to analyse 'anti-social' (online) behaviour and prejudice in a naturalistic setting.

References

Antaki, C, Ardèvol, E, Núñez, F, & Vayreda A 2005, '"For she who knows who she is": Managing accountability in online forum messages', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 114-132.

Arminen, I 2004, 'Second stories: the salience of interpersonal communication for mutual help in Alcoholics Anonymous', *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 36, pp. 319-347.

Bennett, E & Gough, B 2013, 'In pursuit of leanness: The management of appearance, affect and masculinities within a men's weight loss forum', *Health*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 284-299.

Billig, M 1991, *Ideology and opinions: studies in rhetorical psychology*. London: Sage.

British Psychological Society 2007, *Report of the Working Party on Conducting Research on the Internet: Guidelines for ethical practice in psychological research online*. Leicester: British Psychological Society

British Psychological Society 2009, *Code of Human Research Ethics*. Leicester: British Psychological Society

British Psychological Society 2013, *Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research*. Leicester: British Psychological Society

Callaghan, J & Lazard, L 2012, 'Please don't put the whole dang thing out there!: A discursive analysis of Internet discussions around infant feeding', *Psychology & Health*, vol. 27, no. 8, pp. 938-955.

Coulson, NS 2012, 'Research using the Internet: Methodological choices', in N Rmsey & D Hardcourt (eds.), *The Handbook of the Psychology of Appearance*, Croydon: Oxford University Press, pp. 636-644

Elgesem, D 2002, 'What is special about the ethical issues in online research?', *Ethics and Information Technology*, vol. 4, no.3, pp. 195-203

Eysenbach, G & Till, JE 2001, 'Ethical issues in qualitative research on Internet communities'. *British Medical Journal*, vol. 323, pp. 1103-1105.

Goodman, S & Rowe, L 2014, 'Maybe it is prejudice…but it is NOT racism: Negotiating racism in discussion forums about Gypsies'. *Discourse & Society*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 32-46.

Gough, B, McFadden, M & McDonald, M 2013, *Critical Social Psychology: an introduction*, Basingstoke, Palgrave McMillan.

Herman, D 1998, *The antigay agenda: orthodox vision and the Christian right*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Herring, SC 1996, 'Linguistic and critical research on computer-mediated communication: Some ethical and scholarly considerations', *The Information Society*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 153-168.

Herring, S, Sluder, K, Scheckler, R & Barab, S 2002, 'Searching for safety online: managing 'trolling' on a feminist forum', *The Information Society*, vol. 18, pp. 371–384.

Holtz, P, Kronberger, N & Wagner, W 2012, 'Analyzing Internet forums: A practical guide', *Journal of Media Psychology* vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 55-66.

Horne, J & Wiggins, S 2009, 'Doing being "on the edge": managing the dilemma of being authentically suicidal in an online forum', *Sociology of Health & Illness*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 170-184.

Jowett, A 2011, *Chronic illness in non-heterosexual contexts: Towards a critical lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer psychology*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Aston University, Birmingham, UK.

Jowett, A, Peel, E, & Shaw, R 2011, 'Online interviewing in psychology: Reflections on the process', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 354-369

King, SA 1996, 'Researching Internet communities: proposed ethical guidelines for the reporting of results'. *The Information Society*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp.119-127.

Kitzinger, C 2000, 'Doing feminist conversation analysis' *Feminism & Psychology*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 163-193.

Kokkonen, R 2009, 'The fat child - a sign of 'bad' motherhood? an analysis of explanations for children's fatness on a Finnish website', *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, vol. 19, no. 5, pp. 336-347.

Lamerichs, J & te Molder HFM 2003, 'Computer-mediated communication: from a cognitive to a discursive model', *New Media & Society*, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 451-473.

Parker, I 1994, 'Discourse Analysis', in P Banister, E Burman, I Parker, M Taylor & C Tindall (eds.), *Qualitative Methods in Psychology: A research practical guide*, Buckingham, Open University Press, pp. 92-107.

Pitts, V 2004, 'Illness and Internet empowerment: writing and reading breast cancer in cyberspace', *Health*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 33-59.

Potter, J & Hepburn, A 2005, 'Qualitative interviews in psychology: problems and possibilities', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 2, no. 4, pp. 281-307.

Robinson, K 2001, 'Unsolicited narratives from the Internet: A rich source of qualitative data', *Qualitative Health Research*, vol. 11, no. 5, pp. 706-714.

Rodham, K & Gavin, J 2006, 'The ethics of using the Internet to collect qualitative research data', *Research Ethics Review*, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 92-97.

Seale, C, Charteris-Black, J, MacFarlane, A & McPherson, A 2010, 'Interviews and Internet forums: a comparison of two sources of qualitative data', *Qualitative Health Research*, vol. 20, no. 5, pp. 595-606.

Sixsmith, J & Murray, CD 2001, 'Ethical issues in the documentary data analysis of Internet posts and archives', *Qualitative Health Research*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 423-432.

Sneijder, P & te Molder HFM 2004, 'Health should not have to be a problem: talking health and accountability in an Internet forum on veganism', *Journal of Health Psychology*, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 599–616.

Speer, SA & Potter, J 2000, 'The management of heterosexist talk: conversational resources and prejudiced claims', *Discourse & Society*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 543-572.

Stainton Rogers, W 2009, Research methodology. In D Fox, I Prilleltensky & S Austin (eds.), *Critical psychology: an introduction*, London, Sage, pp. 355-354.

Stewart, K & Williams, M 2005, 'Researching online populations: The use of online focus groups for social research', *Qualitative Research*, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 395–416.

Veen, M, te Molder, HFM, Gremmen, B & van Woerkum, C 2010, 'Quitting is not an option: an analysis of online diet talk between celiac disease patients', *Health*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 23-40.

Walther, JB 2002, 'Research ethics in Internet-enabled research: Human subjects issues and methodological myopia', *Ethics and Information Technology*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 205–216.

Whitehead, LC 2007, 'Methodological and ethical issues in Internet-mediated research in the field of health: An integrated review of the literature'. *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 65, no. 4, pp. 782–791.

About the Author

Adam Jowett, PhD, is a Lecturer in Psychology at Coventry University, UK and Secretary of the Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society. He is a critical psychologist with research interests in the intersections of gender, sexuality and health.